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Field Notes

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Ghana going online: The true gods of fraud

If you've ever received an email request for your bank information from someone who claims to have inherited a \$20 million estate and wants to share it with you, it's likely that email originated from West Africa.

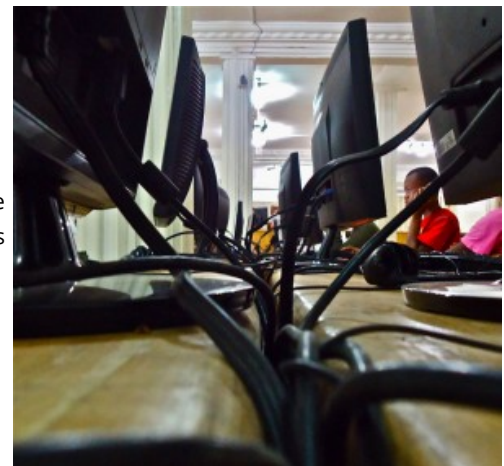
Sakawa, the business of online fraud, is one of Ghana's most profitable and popular underground industries. People use email scams, dating websites and hacking software to tap into bank accounts. Ghana's government has been battling to stop the scammers for years, but to little avail: the country is currently listed as the world's tenth worst country for online fraud.

And there's a spiritual element of *Sakawa* that people don't often hear about. Many of these gods of fraud actually consult their own gods who have adapted to the information age—traditional *juju* (voodoo) priests—before embarking on a scam.

Consulting a spiritualist is part of making major decisions for many Ghanaians. Believers might visit a traditional priest to seek guidance before travelling, getting married or buying a house and now, for a few, before they rip people off online. *Sakawa* hopefuls pay for costly rituals or buy charms and potions with the belief they'll have greater luck luring a wealthy American or European victim online.

The rituals have also garnered a reputation for evoking violence, pushing hopeful fraudsters into crime. This month, a young man looking to get rich quick was arrested for allegedly beheading an eight-year-old boy in order to use the head for a *sakawa* ceremony. Images of the would-be fraudster holding the decapitated head have become ubiquitous in the media, and *sakawa* has once again become a hot topic in the country.

And it's not cheap—ceremonies start from 100 cedis, or about \$75 CAD.



Internet cafes are popular hangouts for internet scammers in Ghana. Photo by Robin Pierro.

"The [scammers] borrow big money from their families and friends and go to the shrines so they can get help to get rich from *sakawa*," reports an IT student in Accra, who says many of his peers are involved in online fraud.

The Afrikania mission, a group working to preserve traditional African religions, says they don't condone traditionalist's support of online fraudsters.

"*Sakawa* is a criminal act, and for the priests to do ceremonies for them is wrong, they should not be involved," says Godwin Azameti, Afrikania's representative in Ghana's Volta Region.

And according to some, online scams are tarnishing Ghana's image in the online world. "The unfortunate thing is that regular Ghanaians are suffering from online crime," says Scott Allen, who runs Ghana's second largest internet café, Sharpnet. "A lot of sites like eBay won't except Ghanaian credit cards or except purchases from Ghanaian IP addresses because of all the fraud."

Allen is always on the lookout for scammers in his café, but as people have begun to catch onto scams, *sakawa* artists are coming up with more creative ways to tap into people's bank accounts. New strategies like using IP blockers and not relying internet cafes (where they're more likely to get caught) have made the fraud harder to track.

As long as *sakawa* exists in Ghana, hopeful scammers will likely continue to shovel money into the pockets of new age *juju* traditionalists in hopes of striking it rich. So who's the true god of fraud in Ghana?

This entry was posted in Ghana, IYIP Educational Officer on May 30, 2011 [<http://www.jhr.ca/blog/2011/05/ghana-going-online-the-true-gods-of-fraud/>] by Robin Pierro.

About Robin Pierro

Robin Pierro has made a habit of dashing off to foreign countries to get the story. Before landing her placement at TV Africa in Accra, Pierro travelled to Kenya, Ghana and Peru to produce three independent documentaries. In Kenya, Pierro spent weeks living and working in one of Africa's largest slums, working on her film *The Voice of Kibera*. Pierro's current role at TV Africa is driven by her belief that journalists have the ability to empower, educate and evoke change through the stories they share. She graduated from Ryerson University with a degree in journalism and was honored with the Joe Perlove Award for the best student journalist in their graduating year.

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One thought on "Ghana going online: The true gods of fraud"



isaac osei

June 1, 2011 at 8:56 pm

this article says it all.... nice one Robin.
